In 1513, Ponce de León became the first known European to officially explore Florida’s Atlantic and Gulf coasts, but we may never know for sure whether or not he actually ventured inland to a spring. The peninsula’s many springs were important to Native Americans for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived. In the 1700s pioneers began moving into the interior of the state, and some settled around springs. When steamboats and railroads began bringing tourists to Florida in the late 1800s, promoters and developers billed Florida springs as miraculous healing waters. Over time, roadside attractions popped up at some of the state’s more famous springs, and Florida evolved into a land of fantasy for tourists, where water-skiing elephants, underwater picnics, and real live mermaids became the norm.
Juan Ponce de León and the Fountain of Youth

The Man & the Myth

Ponce de León, a veteran of Columbus' second voyage to the New World and the first governor of Puerto Rico, landed in Florida on April 2, 1513. The Spanish explorer was in search of gold, slaves, power, and prestige; there is little evidence to suggest he was on a quest for a fountain that bestowed eternal youth. Although it is possible Ponce was familiar with Taíno Indian legends about restorative waters, myths about such waters extend at least as far back as ancient Greece, and stories of healing waters can be found throughout spas in Western Europe. The medieval kingdom of the legendary Prester John was said to contain a fountain of youth, and one of the stories about Alexander the Great includes references to such a fountain. In the case of Ponce de León, the myth was not actually associated with him until more than a decade after his death.

“There is no historical evidence to suggest that Ponce was even aware of the fabled spring, let alone that he risked life and fortune on a quest to locate it.”

– Historian J. Michael Francis
The Fountain of Youth in Pop Culture

Myth & Cliché

For years the connection between Ponce de León and the Fountain of Youth was so accepted in American culture it was included in everything from history textbooks to popular songs. At one point, Ponce’s name and image were used to promote motels, attractions, and even the state as a whole. But as knowledge about Florida’s history and its native people grew, the comical image of a Spaniard on a hopeless quest for youth-giving waters began to fade away.

Yet the fable has become so ingrained in our culture’s consciousness that some version of the Ponce de León/Fountain of Youth story has appeared in almost every form of media from advertising to comic books and from animated cartoons to full-length motion pictures. As we’ve turned our back on Ponce, the story of the Fountain of Youth, now a cultural cliché, lives on.

A. Walt Disney’s 1953 classic animated cartoon “Don and the Fountain of Youth” features a plethora of Florida clichés from alligators to flamingos.

B. Although researchers have found that St. Augustine’s Fountain of Youth attraction was once the site of a Timucuan village, the Native American in this promotional brochure wears a headdress indicative of the Indians of the American West.

C. A 1950s Jerry Lewis comic book depicts the popular comedian interacting with the Spanish explorer and angry Seminole Indians.

D. The popularity of the Fountain of Youth myth in the arts is comprehensive: A television pilot by Orson Welles, a play by Eugene O’Neill, and scores of musical numbers have exploited the myth’s basic plot.

E. Ponce de León discovered the Fountain of Youth at a Havana bar in the illustration on this vintage postcard.

F. Advertising also made use of the legend: Magazine ads for Otis Elevator, Monsanto, the J. Walter Thompson ad agency, and even Tootsie Roll borrowed the myth’s familiar premise.

“At the Fountain of Youth, I saw old rheumatics doing acrobatics, even saw old Rockefeller there, he was busy combing his hair. At the Fountain of Youth…”

“— At the Fountain of Youth” (1915), Charles McCarron & Alex Gerber
Perhaps the advertising slogan for Florida should have been “the land of eternal health and endless sunshine.” From the earliest days of tourism, promoters of the state trumpeted its restorative powers, and northerners in search of better health escaped the frigid weather at home in resort hotels from St. Augustine to Winter Park. Writers Sidney Lanier and Harriet Beecher Stowe extolled Florida’s natural virtues and healthful climate in the 19th century; in the 20th century, several state agencies developed ad campaigns that extolled Florida as the land of miraculous health. Railroads opened up the state for growth in the late 19th century, and better roads followed after World War I. In the early 1920s, the rush to buy a piece of paradise sent land values skyrocketing, and even land around Florida’s springs was for sale. Today, increased population within spring sheds of some of the state’s most popular springs has resulted in lower water quality and diminished flow.

“Picture to yourselves a charming vale surrounded by gentle hills, quiet, peaceful, harboring a constantly gushing spring.”

– Ponce de Leon Springs: Florida’s Greatest Wonder & The Fountain of Youth,” 1925
Retirees flock to Florida

The Silver Revolution

“My parents didn’t want to move to Florida, but they turned sixty and that’s the law.”  – Jerry Seinfeld

As the lure of a healthy lifestyle in Florida entered the national consciousness, senior citizens in record numbers began to move to the sunshine year-round in the second half of the twentieth century. Advertising for the state “had long promoted Florida as a modern Fountain of Youth,” as historian Gary Mormino has written.

Today the state is abundant with retirement communities and whole cities for retirees.
In the late 19th century, St. Augustine attracted visitors seeking better health, like Henry Flagler and his ailing wife, Mary. Health spas opened around several Florida springs and along the St. Johns River. Spas opened at White Springs and Suwannee Springs along the Suwannee River, Orange Springs on the Ocklawaha, Green Cove Springs on the St. Johns, Worthington Springs on the Santa Fe, and Newport Springs on the St. Marks. Panacea Mineral Springs touted its healing powers in the Panhandle, and Hampton Springs in Taylor County counted Teddy Roosevelt among its visitors.

Guaranteed for Rheumatism, Indigestion, Dyspepsia, Stomach, Kidney, Bladder Troubles, Gastritis and Skin Diseases.” – Postcard for Hampton Springs in Taylor County
Florida Citrus Blooms

Health in a Can

“The Florida orange . . . is the Fountain of Youth overlooked by Ponce de Leon and is one of the best known antidotes for old age.” – Dr. J. H. Kellogg

The Florida Citrus Mutual website claims that the first citrus grown in Florida was planted by Ponce de León near St. Augustine. It is known that European explorers did bring citrus to the New World and that orange trees were growing at St. Augustine by the end of the 16th century. By the 19th century, the prospect of growing citrus drew “boatloads of citizens eager to purchase a five-acre tract and homestead,” according to historian Gary Mormino. By the 20th century groves spread throughout the state, and the words Florida citrus had become synonymous with good health and vitality.

Anthony T. Rossi of Tropicana is given credit for coining the phrase “a day without Florida orange juice is like a day without sunshine.” Before that, Orlando’s Dr. Philip Phillips, a pioneer in citrus marketing, urged the American public to “Drink Dr. Phillips Orange Juice because the Doc says it’s good for you.” From early print advertising to contemporary websites, the link between robust health and Florida citrus has been one of the most persistent messages to consumers worldwide.
In Volusia County, owners of a historic spring known as Spring Garden opened a hotel next to the water and renamed it Ponce de Leon Springs in the 1880s. The spring developed into a full-fledged roadside attraction with water-skiing shows, electric boat rides, an exotic animal show, and even a waterskiing elephant.

Warm Mineral Springs near Venice also made the claim to be the Fountain of Youth sought by the Spanish explorer. A health spa opened there in the 1950s, taking advantage of the high mineral content of the 87-degree water. A plaque nearby declares the spring indeed to be the legendary waters sought by the Spanish explorer.

Wakulla Springs, developed by Florida businessman Ed Ball, advertised that Ponce de León visited the spring near Tallahassee on both of his expeditions to Florida. The lodge at the spring was said to be home to the arrowhead that caused Ponce’s fatal wounds. Today Wakulla Springs is a state park.

“The miracle of nature sought by Ponce de Leon now yours to enjoy”
– Promotional brochure for Warm Mineral Springs
Early Fountain of Youth Attractions

It’s in the Water

“One of the most important and romantic events in New World History was the search by Ponce de Leon for the Fountain of Youth and his subsequent landing here...”

– Mid-20th century brochure copy for the Fountain of Youth Park in St. Augustine

St. Augustine was home to one of the earliest attractions that claimed to be the Fountain of Youth. Real estate promoter John Whitney charged admission to drink from a spring in the 1880s. “Diamond Lil” McConnell opened what is today’s Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park in St. Augustine in 1904.

In St. Petersburg, a health spa also dubbed the Fountain of Youth began in 1908 to take advantage of the high mineral content discovered in a well that had been dug a few years earlier at the end of a pier in the bay. Eventually the “fountain” was moved inland and became the focus of a city park. It remains today as a simple drinking fountain.
Florida’s springs were its earliest attractions. The notion of a place where reality was suspended and fantasy commonplace was on display in the crystal-clear waters. Many springs show archaeological evidence of thousands of years of use by the state’s indigenous people before being “discovered” by European and American settlers. Northerners knew of Silver Springs as an attraction in the late 19th century, thanks to steamboats that traveled up the St. Johns River. In the golden age of roadside tourism, Weeki Wachee Springs became the culmination of Florida’s illusion take on reality as surreal underwater scenes came to life before tourists’ amazed eyes and the mythic was made real.

“Glass bottom boats, mermaids, underwater performances, petting zoos – Florida’s tourist industry began with the state’s natural springs.” – Tim Hollis, “Glass Bottom Boats & Mermaid Tails"